

The day before

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From 11 am to 4:30 pm

The day before, that is really today, we danced tirelessly until dawn. Nevertheless, I woke up a few hours later, ready for a Saturday full of activities. I'm very curious about the seminar *On Homelands and the Stateless as the World Tilts Right*, organized by Creative Time and curated by Nato Thompson for the Onassis Cultural Centre. The first to speak is Tania Bruguera and her extensive experience allows her to challenge us without hesitation: it's not about analysing political situations, but about creating them; it's not about reacting to events and periodicals, but about producing events and being ahead of the news. Tania understands art as a space from where to project oneself into the future, to challenge our political imagination and push our creativity beyond the reactive behaviour that characterizes the thoughts and missions of the Left all throughout a world whose news one cannot get ahead. Tania insists on inviting us to search for a manner to paralyse power, to get it by surprise, to make it study our languages if it wants to censor us, to force it to have to make the effort to understand us before it can answer us. To paralyse power... How to consider such a possibility when 'our' own debates seem paralysed?

The first roundtable after the opening speech was called *Where is South Africa Now, Now?* In it, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Zimasa Mpemnyama and Ziyana Lategan, all of them black and South African, exposed their conclusions about the reality they share. A reality that homogenizes the black population in its dispossessed condition: because they don't possess common goods in South Africa they constitute a stateless group inside their own country, as well as in the world. They all agreed that *stateless* is synonymous with *blackness*, and that the good-intentioned European Left didn't do more than mediate between the *stateless* and the power. Ziyana affirmed that today the refugee is the new marginalized subject of capitalism, which continuously needs to create a victim to be helped, in order to divert attention from the colonized subjects that sustain its historical development. Ziyana laughed and maintained a relaxed attitude while affirming that capitalism is

inseparable from colonialism and that Europe hasn't given the world anything good. The two first questions from the audience were asked by white women who didn't agree with that statement. One asked if they were not interested in exchanges with possible international solidarity chains, if they rejected all kinds of intercultural collaboration and sponsored an uncompromising position on the matter. I don't remember what the other one asked, but both interventions caused Simone Leigh, a black American woman and member of the Black Lives Matter movement, to intercept the microphone and say that the amount of *white tears* flowing around dismayed her.

The format of the seminar didn't allow for wide discussions and because of this the first misunderstanding remained up in the air, densifying it in a way that affected the next roundtable. The ambitious title *How to be as radical as reality itself?* was the umbrella that united Defne Ayas, Adam Kleinman, Natalia Antonova, and Antonia Majaca. Except for the latter, all seemed anxious when they took the microphone after hearing that their home continent was designated as historically colonizing – what probably prompted Adam to make clear that despite working in Holland, he's from Turkey. It was probably Antonia's expatriate condition (having been born in a country that no longer exists) that allowed her to approach in a complex manner the corral that had distressed the European attendants that morning, resorting to Denise Ferreira da Silva and her distinction between a 'universal me' and an 'effective me'. These 'mes' differ because of subjectivity and optics, and allow us to differentiate the position of the one who is always affected. Anyway, the ability of the audience to understand reality seemed already split in two irreconcilable ways of looking, dyed in black and white.

Fortunately, the third roundtable, *How do indigenous symbolic representations help us visualize resistance?* helped us escape the black and white entrapment and visualize not only resistance, but also strategies to imagine and act beyond the institutional corsets of artistic or state spaces.

Gladys Tzul Tzul addressed some experiences in collective work undertaken in Guatemala, where notions of authorship and ownership are challenged, as well as the official readings that relegate the fabrics woven by indigenous women to products made to marvel the tourist's eye. As she explained the various manners in which communitary practices and rituals structure indigenous creation and work,

Gladys underlined the importance of parties as strategies to create symbolic short-circuits that allow us to catch a glimpse of what would be an upside-down world. More than proposing a utopian vision of their practices, she showed that collectivizing property and sharing creative tasks in indigenous contexts constitutes a reality in permanent renovation and self-affirmation, sustained by a thread that, as frail as it is, allows them to connect past, present, and future with fluidity and coherence.

Benvenuto Chavajay started out by saluting with a “good morning and good afternoon to everyone”, reminding us that while it was morning here, in Guatemala it was still late in the day. He presented himself as one of “the generation of a son of illiterate parents, therefore I exist, resist, and re-exist”, and during his speech he quoted his father several times to explain his way of understanding art and the world. Benvenuto described his art as a way to dust off history and awake a numb memory. He also described it as a way of giving the stone a second chance in order to re-dignify it, evoking its cultural heritage as another way of “speaking truth in the form of a lie and lying in the form of truth”. That’s how the artist denounced his own disappearance in a local newspaper, with a picture and colour reportage; he literally threw a lime on a peace treaty signed by his country, and drew Christopher Columbus covered by husks of corn, to “cover the discoverer”. Benvenuto tattooed on himself the ID card of Doroteo Guamucho, who won the Olympics but whose name was mistakenly exchanged by an American news anchor for Mateo Flores, and so remained immortalized as the name of the main Guatemalan sports stadium. The artist managed to put up for debate in Congress the restitution of the correct name, and showed his tattoo to the press the day the majority of Congress voted for changing the lettering on the huge building’s front wall. The pictures showing the before and after of the operation not only were evidence of an action that was as poetic as it was demanding, but also showed what simple artistic gestures can achieve when they intelligently penetrate the instances of power. Chavajay’s next mission was to approach the UN and demand the return of the ancient manuscripts of Mayan and other indigenous cultures, without which the very soul of Guatemala has become ill. He maintained that his country doesn’t need money, but needs to take back its soul and that art has moved to smaller towns where it doesn’t need the public’s attention, but the attention of the stones. Even if the audience probably didn’t

know how to deal with such an affirmation, to me it was especially touching when he reminisced about his father telling him that when he sees an indigenous person with his head lowered, it means that person is talking to the earth, not that the person was beaten.

Five hundred years of struggle, death, and resistance could be summed up by that phrase. Five hundred years of contempt for those who managed to communicate with the one who provides us with food and life, readily condensed in a few potent words. Benvenuto's art was also a source of renovation of our sleeping, marginalized, or underestimated energies. To those of us who were in the audience that day, it was proof that the world is not black and white, to those who came from historically ill countries, wounded by their history or with histories full of wounds, to listen to Gladys and Benvenuto felt like healing a bit. It was also a reminder that our hybridity can and must be a source of creative action, instead of a source of paralysis before the immensity of what hurts us.

In that reduced albeit diverse auditorium some of us felt enthusiastic or inspired, while others remained sceptical, as expressed by an assistant who asked Gladys about the land owning situation in Guatemala and used the expression *communal dream*. By exposing her ignorance of historical indigenous struggles, the question became almost offensive: it elevated to an abstraction and a kind of utopian naivety what is in fact a concrete reality, whose defence costs lives on a daily basis because of its resistance to phagocytic capitalism, which is expert in detecting and sabotaging all that resists privatization and sale.

The day came to a close at the Onassis Cultural Centre, but the audience did not grow, nor did we understand the meager attendance—and the general lack of Greeks—, even if I guessed that it was due to the fact that the place squandered resources in an almost grotesque manner in a city that was evidently in a *crisis*. Even if this word is to be used with caution, it's inevitable to summon it when one walks around and notices the amount of abandoned shops and the houses and places for rent, in contrast to the imposing Onassis building, its shining premises adorned with coloured lights that use up energy without qualms, and with the amount of personnel hired to clean and watch the outside and inside of the building and who quickly could have filled up the auditorium—or at least could have ensured that the majority of the audience at the event was not made up of the event's own

participants.

Undoubtedly, I thought, if I were Greek I'd find this luxurious display very aggressive, especially in a situation that not only affects life in the city but also divides even more radically the contemporary art scene (with their privileged usages of time and their dependency on troublesome sponsors), of the spaces dedicated to activism and 'real' politics (with their own contradictions, infights, and conjunctural urgencies).

From 5 pm to 8 pm

These suspicions were quickly confirmed, for the day remained dedicated to listening—this time, we, the foreigners (Capacete resident artists) listened to a Greek, Orestis Doulos. He's a member of the Greek Communist Party and took part in the Left coalition that supported Syriza until the party did everything that would have been done if the YES had won the 2015 referendum, despite the NO having won. Orestis made a brief recapitulation of the recent history of his country, attributing its condition of being the weakest link in the European Union chain to the feebleness of its productive base, an almost non-existent industry and service economy, with exception to the ship owners who also own the soccer teams and the media. That is, a fistful of magnates traditionally benefited by the State, among them the Onassis empire.

In a couple of hours Orestis drew for us a disheartening landscape of the state of the Greek mood. He himself said that, "despite being a fun guy", he was depressed, as was the rest of the population. He told us that psychoanalysts were the only ones having a good moment, because most of those who could afford it were in therapy, in a context of general unemployment of 25%, youth (18-28 years) unemployment of 50%, and a visible drop in childbirth (most of the couples who decide to have kids have no more than one). He also talked about the rise in suicides, and told us that the most spectacular suicides were those of leftists who could not deal with powerlessness and disillusionment.

He reminisced about the atmosphere before the referendum, the revolutionary spirit one could feel on the streets, how they would sing OXI ['no'] at the subway exit, how the people were really willing to make sacrifices in order to change their lives, and how "we thought he was one of us, but now people are disappointed with

everything”.

Today he said that no one believes Greece will pay the debt, and that everyone expects the meltdown, prepares for the collapse. Raúl then remembered who coined the term ‘anthropocene’ and how, in his opinion, what one should do was to stop pretending to change an irreversible ending, and rather ask ourselves seriously how we want to spend our final chapter on Earth. Raúl said that he felt that coming here, from our countries, was like coming over to witness a process of shutting down, of parting, of mourning. I asked myself how to ease a collective mourning of a Left whose heart is broken: where to start to heal the wounds caused by the conclusion that legitimate hopes were put on those one already knew beforehand would not keep their promises? I also remembered the illusion that their referendum awoke in other parts of the world, in many faraway and very distant places, in so many other leftist parties that also needed healing, in me and in so many other people who had been recovering from similar disappointments, asking ourselves how to connect again with the possibility of collective change.

The uncertainty and melancholy enfolded us, but they were discreet feelings, even lovely ones, probably because we felt part of the right crowd, above all when contrasted with certain extreme local landscapes described by Orestis and because we were together. In the end we managed to comprehend the subtle manners in which despair manifests itself among the people who had up until then seemed enthusiastic, open, and very kind. The little Kipseli Square itself didn’t seem to evidence this somber disposition with its well tended gardens, lively cafés, and neighborhood kids playing all around. We spoke of depression in cheerful surroundings.

We were focused on learning from this new context when suddenly there was a dry, hard, very violent thud. We turned around to check where this was coming from and could see a leg going back to its original, vertical position right after flexing and quickly stretching out to reach and kick a pigeon as if it were a soccer ball. The man who almost killed this animal turned around in a bad mood while the woman who accompanied him smiled. The pigeons flew away quickly. One of them probably died a bit later with its internal organs ruptured, I don’t know. What I know is that I felt a deep chill that vibrated through my entire body, filling me with an anguishing energy while I shared my pain with Sol, Gris, and Raúl. Our looks met undaunted in

this moment of confusion and unrealness. Some people around us commented on it, some laughed at it, Gian said “that’s how the Balkans are”, and I thought that I was really ignorant about that, if that episode could shake me like nothing else I had seen during my time in Athens. Not my previous encounters with junkies; nor the rests of their precarious belongings in the parks; nor the sidewalks lined with condoms, needles, and hypodermics thrown around; nor the unstoppable flux of clients going in and out of well-known whorehouses; nor the fictions of shelters made with recycled material under which people slept on the streets; nor the bloody hand I had seen a few days before after an apparent fight on a street used only by men. I don’t know if it makes sense to make such a list as that, above all because since I began writing this text new things have happened that could fit perfectly alongside those events; despite all of that, nothing up to now has managed to shake me quite as much as that kick.

Orestis’ kindness managed to recover our concentration and we kept talking for a long time, until I realized it was the scheduled time for a Butoh event I wanted to attend.

From 8:30 pm to the void

In a space called Kodo the Spanish dancer Marianela León Ruiz was going to perform. The place was completely silent and Marianela had all the attention of the small audience. She moved slowly over a chair, lying down and retreating over herself, never settled, never stable. Her body controlled the situation, but at the same time seemed to be considering whether to fall into some kind of void that we began to intuit around her. And that in a little while we’d realize she made us inhabit.

The chair ended up between her legs, accompanying her in a relenting, difficult walk, as if it were a prosthetic limb of some invisible extremity that made its way into the material world at her expense. The sensations that watching her produced in me were somewhat familiar. I know. Clarice. Clarice Lispector. *The Passion According to G.H.* (“I’ve lost something that was essential to me and it’s no longer so. I don’t need it anymore, as though I had lost a third leg that up until then kept me from walking but made me a stable tripod. I’ve lost that third leg. And have gone back to being a person I never was. Back to having what I never had before: only two legs. I know that I can walk only when I have two legs. But the useless

absence of the third leg makes me long for it and it scares me; it was that leg that made me able to find myself, and without even having to worry about it".)

When she freed herself from it, the movements began to enfold all of her body, but the path to greater freedom was not simple, nor fluid. There was something in her that seemed to arise in the midst of a quarrel whose anguish we couldn't fully grasp, despite noticing it physically and sonorously by certain noises Marianela made—or rather they came out from her as if she couldn't help it. Her laboured contractions alternated the expansion and the opening of herself, with gestures from which sprouted forth this other self that seemed to be demanding to be born from itself. The sounds that reached us through her made me think of some nonexistent bird, while her body remained undecided between throwing away or protecting these other identities that inhabited it. Again, the word 'anguish' came to me and also resorted to my body. Something of the feeling of the pigeon who was kicked while walking around inadvertently also took hold of my body. Outside a baby cried incessantly. The weeping made the feelings that came to me more pungent, but again some familiarity about the ritual we had witnessed led me to a book that had touched me deeply: Octavia. Butler. Bloodchild.

("Terrans should be protected from seeing." I didn't like the sound of that—and I doubted that it was possible. "Not protected, I said. "Shown. Shown when we're young kids, and shown more than once. Gatoi, no Terran ever sees a birth that goes right. All we see is N'Tlic—pain and terror and maybe death.")

It was as if Marianela had been showing us what it's like to live inhabited by death. The death we get closer to every day we live, the death of those we love and that we mourn as if we could avoid it, the death that surrounds us and that we choose to face indifferently in order to cope with our impotence. It was as if watching her we could understand something about the lack that constitutes us, as if by watching her we could make vibrate this lack in each one of us. Not to understand it rationally, nor try to locate or fixate it, but to embody it, at least for a moment. That is to say, to accept better our lack of understanding. Our inability to understand lack and death, above all our own.

("No. All intense understanding is, finally, the revelation of a deep lack of understanding. All moments of discovery are a loss to oneself. Maybe it has happened to me, an incomprehension as total as ignorance, and from that I emerge,

as intact and innocent as before. Any understanding of mine will never be up to this comprehension, since merely living is the height I can reach, my only level is to live.”)

Marianela walked towards the window of the third floor we were at. By then she had already rid herself of her clothes and her body, thin, somewhat hairy, climbed on the lintel leaning of the chair of a spectator, who probably didn't go there thinking that at some point all the eyes in the room would be turned to her. Much less imagined, at the start of the day, that later she'd have Marianela's pubic hair close to her face, and that she'd be taking part in the complex joke being played on us. And of course it was funny to see her with half her body out of the window, and think of the passers-by suddenly seeing an ass in the air during their stroll through touristic downtown Athens. But it also produced a kind of shiver to know she was in the exact limit between self-preservation and free fall, at the edge of such possibility (even if metaphorically). Her body was there, it fitted exactly the height of the window, as if the architecture had been waiting to offer itself to her as material for resignifying. If she really had wanted to jump, what would have made sense to say? Would it have made sense to try to stop her? What would have been more violent: the fall, or the attempt to prevent it? These questions surrounded me and I did what I could to get them out of my mind. Did she by any chance intend to make us think about that? Did she want us to think thinkable, verbalizable, transmissible things through something like a gesture or movement? Did she want us to look through our normal capacity for judgment?

(“Life and death have been mine, and I have been monstrous. My worth has been that of a sleepwalker that simply moves forward. For 16 hours of doom I had the courage to not compose nor organize. Above all, of not foreseeing. Up until then I hadn't had the courage to let myself be guided by what I didn't know, in the direction of the unknown: my predictions determined beforehand what I'd see. They were not the conjectures of my vision: they already had the size of my precautions. My predictions closed the world off to me.”)

Marianela was now in a corner. She managed to fix our attention to a toilet paper roll with which she was dancing, starting from the farther end of the room until she got close to the audience. She got so close we can see her skin in detail, let ourselves be disturbed with no other distractions, even if my head turns towards

books—this time, straight to *Testo Junkie*. I wonder if she is also her own guinea pig, like Paul Preciado cheered us all to be around 2008. I observe her furriness and remember that potent invitation to de-identify ourselves with the genders that were attributed to us, as well as Preciado's insistence that, more than penises and vaginas, the voice and body hair are what make us more easily identifiable as men or women. Marianela exhibits a hybrid nudity that issues a challenge from a much more frail and uncertain place than that of the revolutionary pharmacopornocapitalist critical philosophy. There are no speeches, conclusions, or second-person interpellations in her performance, maybe because the first-person itself is not even evident. How many people inhabit that first-person? How can we give sensible shape to these other forms of being, that extrapolate the word *I* in the singular? Maybe despite the difference in employed languages, there's much in common between how that book and that dance interpellate, challenge, seduce, and confound us. Both result in a disturbing invitation to ask oneself about the multiplicity of possibilities we carry in our bodies. And they're both the result of meticulous work, consistent with vital bets that concretely demand a challenge to the ingrained habits that keep us locked up.

Ruiz continued the sequence of movements that had us mesmerized, inventing her own rituals with the help of a toilet paper roll. When she finished, my Spanish friends went over to congratulate her. I was still trying to process what I had seen when someone called me. I found myself to be lost for words when they introduced me to her, and soon it seemed unreal that the body that had just publically shared the density of its experience in such a hypnotic and disturbing way could return my look with such a twinkle in the eyes and such a generous smile. Alex, Kike, and I could barely speak while she looked at us with attention and joy.

We walked back to the Exarcheia neighbourhood, talking. We ate a 1,30 euro souvlaki. Exchanged some opinions about *documenta*. I was tired and stimulated, wanted to re-read Clarice, Octavia, and show Benvenuto's work to the others. I wanted to learn to establish a dialogue between the wounds in history and the wounds in my body, like he does, and explore that as if it were both mine and alien, like Marianela did. I got home and wrote in my calendar what I had done that day and looked into what to do in the following days. The next week would be diverse: a queer re-reading of Nietzsche and Kavafis, organized by Studio 14 for *documenta*, a

concert by an old-school Greek experimental music legend, the gesture study workshop of Alexandra Bachzetsis, and also my birthday.